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AUTHOR Young, Beth Rapp
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ABSTRACT

The conditions under which graduate students teach freshman composition militate against a comfortable and productive relationship between instructors and students. As instructors are constrained by political forces beyond their control, such as lack of position and power, teaching undervalued courses, and the lack of respect from students, their position can be improved only if the academic community is willing to address and change those political forces. Largely because of these conditions, one instructor, now at Rollins College, found that she and her students had become "evil twins," to borrow a term from Jane Tompkins; that is, both the instructor and the students were acting from defensive postures. The classroom quickly became a hostile environment, in which the instructor attempted to prove her worth through lecturing or performing and the students showed their disrespect for the class and the instructor through rude behavior. Advice that colleagues and advisers offered this instructor were of minimal value. The insecurities inherent in the position of the graduate student and the scholarly demands placed on him or her by research faculty make experimental collaborative learning, as described by Tompkins, an unpromising possibility. (TB)

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ED 372 413

CCCC Presentation for March 18, 1994 Beth Rapp Young

Breeding the "Evil Twin" in the Composition Classroom

This presentation was inspired by an event I probably shouldn't admit to, at least not until I'm a professor somewhere: one of the freshman composition classes I taught recently was an utter failure. The classroom was a hostile place, where I felt forever on the defensive, and apparently so did the students. The first day started this way, and it never improved. The students rebelled against every kind of activity we tried, from group work to individual work to class discussion to lectures. They made it absolutely clear that it was a stupid class, a waste of time, and that I had absolutely nothing to teach them.

At first I sought out help from colleagues and the very experienced staff of the Freshman Writing Program which employed me. They tried to be helpful, but their suggestions were hard to follow. "Use humor," was one suggestion, but the situation didn't seem funny to me, and I am not comfortable with using sarcasm to put people in their places. Another suggestion was, "Don't put up with it." I wasn't quite sure just how I was supposed to accomplish this. Should I fail everyone, or kick everyone out of the class? I was desperately afraid of losing control. So I found myself doing everything I don't believe in: asserting myself by showing off how much more I knew than the students, using jargon, putting more negative than positive comments on papers, and basically reminding them that they had to

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do what I said because I was assigning grades. I'm sure we were all relieved when the semester came to an end.

But the mysterious thing was, these students were wonderful when I met them outside of class for conferences. I enjoyed talking with them about their writing, and I think they enjoyed it, and I think we all learned from each other. They were like different people when we met outside the classroom.

Obviously, we weren't really ourselves in the classroom. They were rude and uncooperative; I was arrogant and domineering. *We became our own evil twins.* We took on nonproductive roles in the classroom, and we didn't seem able to get out of them.

In her **College English** article, "Pedagogy of the Distressed" (when I saw that title, I thought, "That's me!"), Jane Tompkins suggests a model for what happens when our "evil twins" take over--the "performance model,' in which, instead of worrying about how best to help the students to understand the material, our goal becomes how to perform before them in such a way that they have a good opinion of us. This performance model, she points out, is driven by fear--we don't want anyone to know our insecurities. She notes that fear is especially prevalent in graduate school (654).

I would go even further than Tompkins. Not only are conditions under which grad students teach likely to promote a performance model, the conditions are especially likely to spawn appalling performances--"evil twins." One reason is the relative powerlessness of graduate students. Though we are, by some

lights, the most sheltered of species because we're needed to teach the classes that no one else wants, such as freshman composition, we don't earn respect for our teaching.

Our students aren't stupid--they know which courses are devalued, and they don't think any more highly of freshman comp than anyone else in the academy. And our professors hand us a script which says, "your research is more important, don't spend so much time on the students, they'll just drain the energy you need for your own work, etc." One of the more common pieces of advice to grad instructors--"Don't tell them you aren't a professor and they won't know"--underscores the fact that we don't deserve respect on our own.

Small wonder that grad students succumb to the incredible lure of the spotlight. Being the teacher, lecturing to a class of (mostly) attentive faces, is a thrill. There's nothing like saying something and watching your students write it down. I'm not saying I wouldn't rather be a good educator--I do prefer dialogue to monologue--but it's very hard to resist this appeal.

Students, of course, have their own scripts to follow. They need security as much as the next person, so they can very easily take on the role which says: "this stuff isn't important anyway; either you're born knowing how to write or you aren't and there's nothing you can do about it; this isn't a real class; this person isn't a real teacher," etc. If they join forces to follow these scripts, that's more power for them. And like grad students,

undergraduates are especially likely to cling to these roles when the class isn't going well.

Tompkins--along with many, many others--suggests that collaborative, student-owned pedagogies might banish those "evil twins" from our classrooms. For example, in her classes, Tompkins' students choose the topics that interest them, they work in groups to present the topics and facilitate class discussion, and she gives written comments but no grades.

I believe that this kind of class is very rewarding for students and teachers alike. But unfortunately, it's not safe for graduate students to embrace such pedagogies wholeheartedly. Though it might seem that we can take more risks because 1) we teach courses no one else thinks much of, 2) we might not be "stuck in a rut" and 3) no one really expects us to be perfect anyway, we have a lot to lose by experimenting.

We don't have years of good evaluations to balance out the horrible ones. We don't have job security. We can't afford to spend too much time on our teaching--we won't earn the respect of our professors that way. Not only that--we have to go on the job market (we hope) soon. How will interviewers view such collaborative pedagogies?

After all, Tompkins herself was subject to slashing responses which insisted she was lazy and irresponsible. Grad students who have far less credibility, and who have had far less time to demonstrate their commitment to teaching, can't afford to risk such condemnation.

And when I attended a breakfast recently where people were discussing a job candidate, talk centered around how "instead of a teaching demonstration" the candidate divided the students into groups, and helped the groups interpret and apply the material. The search committee was shocked--they wanted to see how the candidate would "actually teach." So they told her to give a second demonstration, in which she presumably would lecture, and they weren't pleased about the logistical problems this created.

Now I do incorporate group work in my classes, but after hearing this conversation, I would never set up a class which was entirely student-owned with no lectures. After all, how can I prepare for the job market without practicing my teaching performance in the classroom?

Sadly, grad students also have the most to lose by asking for help with difficult classes. I know I didn't want to keep haunting the offices of my employers, admitting my latest failure to make the class more tolerable for my students and myself. And I worried constantly that by asking for advice, or even seeking consolation from my friends, I damaged my credibility even more.

Promoting student-owned classrooms, collaborative pedagogies, will by itself never be enough to eliminate the "evil twin." We also need to pay specific attention to the conditions which breed them, especially in undervalued classes taught by graduate students. And we need to recognize that, though what we do in the classroom *is* our politics, our individual classroom performances are often constrained by other political forces

beyond our control. Only by addressing these forces can we hope to stop breeding "evil twins" in the classroom.

Works Cited

Tompkins, Jane. "Pedagogy of the Distressed." **College Composition and Communication** 52 (October 1990): 653-60.